

# A Record of Accomplishments

## Interview with Rowland Bowers

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**F**rom 1981 until his retirement in January 1997, after 32 years of federal service, Rowland T. Bowers played a key role in managing the cultural resources programs of the National Park Service. He served for much of this period as NPS deputy associate director for cultural resources and ultimately as assistant director in charge of the National Center for Cultural Resources Stewardship and Partnership Programs. Rowland received the Department of the Interior's highest honor, the Meritorious Service Award, and was the 1997 recipient of the George Wright Society Cultural Resource Management Award. In the following excerpts from his exit interview, conducted by NPS Bureau Historian Barry Mackintosh and *CRM* editor Ron Greenberg, Mr. Bowers comments on the years he worked in the Cultural Resources programs of the NPS.

**Over the years people have debated whether and how our NPS programs for identifying and assisting cultural resources outside national park areas should be integrated with our park CRM activities. Some have felt that the so-called external or partnership programs will always get shortchanged in an agency whose primary mission is park management, and they have advocated removing these programs to a separate agency. Others have seen greater benefits in trying to integrate these partnership programs as closely as possible with park operations. How do you come down on this issue?**

I've always been a strong proponent of having the partnership programs in the National Park Service. The NPS is responsible for the most significant cultural resources in this country, and we are looked at as leaders in the management of those resources. It makes a lot of sense to have the programs for carrying out assistance activities affecting the rest of the nation's resources integrated into the system responsible for the nation's most significant resources. There have been problems with effectively using people and dollars for the national partnership programs in ways that benefit from the knowledge and understanding we gain from our management of park resources, and keeping those activities coordinated. But I believe that on the whole, having that connection has been very beneficial.

As for removing the partnership programs to a separate agency, it's absolute folly to believe you can create a small agency and expect it to survive over time with the changing political winds and the whims of the political system. It just won't happen. Having these programs integrated with the NPS gives them

high visibility and a high rating by the American public and helps sustain them. And the presence of the partnership programs in the NPS helps support its resource stewardship responsibilities. So I think it's a win-win situation, although not everyone perceives it that way.

**Is there a perception now that the amalgamation of the programs is working better than before when people were more outspoken about separating them, or are people just accepting the situation while still unhappy about it?**

Some people just accept the situation and are still not happy about it. But I think a lot of people, as they become more informed about the programs and the restructured NPS where we've begun to integrate park resources stewardship and the partnership programs, are beginning to see the benefits of integration. And generally, at the field level, having managers involved in resources stewardship responsibilities as well as partnership responsibilities makes sense.

The problem today, as to some extent it's been in the past, is that there are not enough operating resources, so people feel the tug between their stewardship responsibilities and their partnership responsibilities. We're downsizing an organization that was generally set up to be a central provider of services both for park resources stewardship and for partnership programs, and we haven't faced the fact that we should have maintained that core staff to provide those services while expanding staff at the park level. So there is a definite friction occurring, simply because there's not enough time to do everything that needs to be done. But I think that can work out.

**For both philosophical and budgetary reasons, some have suggested that the NPS should devote itself largely to cultural resources of national significance and leave primary responsibility for resources of lesser significance to others. Given our present and likely future capabilities, to what extent do you agree or disagree with this approach?**

On the park side, park managers have responsibility under Section 110 of the National Historic Preservation Act to identify all cultural resources, whether or not they're nationally significant or related to the parks' legislated purposes, and take them into account in their planning. But we also recognize that priorities have to be set in terms of where we put our dollars, and we don't have the dollars to preserve all park resources.

So tough decisions have to be made, and to the extent that we focus on the more nationally-significant resources, that's a good idea. But we also have to do our best to stabilize resources that are not nationally significant and find alternative ways to preserve them. You may have a park that doesn't have nation-

ally-significant resources, but it has locally-significant resources that are very important to the local community. So the park may work in partnership with the community to preserve those resources. Planning decisions have to be made, priorities have to be set, and alternative ways of funding the work that can't get done have to be found.

In terms of our national partnership programs, we clearly have responsibility for programs affecting the broad range of cultural resources in this country, and responsibility to work through our primary partners, particularly the states. We must always keep in mind that preservation really begins at the local level, and that the resources most important to people are often those of local or regional significance.

We have a special responsibility, under the Historic Sites Act and the National Historic Preservation Act, for national historic landmarks. I think that's one area where we need to continue to put emphasis, because it's a natural leadership role for the NPS. It's also an area of frustration, because we don't have the resources to increase that focus.

**What has changed most about the park resource stewardship programs since you became involved with them?**

I think there's been a much greater awareness by managers of the need to preserve park cultural resources, whether they relate to a park's legislated purpose, whether they are national historic landmarks that just happen to be in parks, or whether they have only local significance.

**Is this true in the predominantly natural and recreational parks, where old-line managers sometimes regarded cultural resources as nuisances or intrusions they would just as soon do without?**

Certainly there have been conflicts between natural resource management and cultural resource management. These conflicts will always be with us. What we have to do is make sure we've done our planning correctly: we've identified the resources, and we've made decisions in consultation with others. And if the decision, for example, is to place a natural resource habitat preservation need above a cultural resource preservation need, we should go ahead as long as we have done our planning and adverse effects on the cultural resources will be minimized. On the other hand, to arbitrarily ignore or damage resources because of the idea that they are outside a park's legislated mandate is wrong, and I think it's occurring less frequently than it used to. I think there's a much greater stewardship awareness, and I think there's much greater awareness among cultural and natural resource managers of the need to work together in making decisions affecting both. Good planning is at the base of good decision-making.

There's another positive change in cultural resource management I should note. We've been able

to move ahead in getting funding to inventory our park cultural resources. The archeological inventory program is an example. Certainly historic structures and cultural landscapes is a large initiative now. The highly successful inventory and cataloging of our museum collections is something that did not exist 15 years ago. We've made quantum leaps in gaining a better understanding of our resources.

**What has changed most about the external or partnership programs since you became involved with them?**

You have to look at it program by program. For example, in the battlefield program we've moved into an area of working with states and local communities and other governmental agencies to preserve resources in a very proactive manner. We've done this through good land use planning techniques, trying to de-emphasize funding—at least land acquisition by the federal government.

There's been a much greater awareness of the need to make information we have available for research and education. The National Register Information System is one example of moving information to the public. Teaching with Historic Places is another example of making information more accessible.

Technology has come into play in how we manage our programs. HABS/HAER used to rely on measured drawings done by hand. They're now using CAD [computer-aided design], and that will become the predominant way of doing measured drawings in the future. The use of GPS and GIS in locating and placing resources in an automated geographical context has made great strides.

We've made tremendous strides in the archeological assistance program. We went from a focus on doing work for other federal agencies to one of education and outreach, making sure that the public has information about the importance of preserving archeological resources. We're putting out a periodical for the public to help them understand why archeological resources are important. The importance of cultural landscapes has been recognized and a program established.

We've streamlined the Historic Preservation Fund program. We've streamlined the tax act program to some extent, but I think the effort there has been more one of maintaining the integrity of that program so it is not susceptible to political pressure, and when it has been subject to political pressure we've been able to resist it.

The states, while they've suffered under very unreasonable funding levels, have grown tremendously in their ability and expertise to be the leaders at that level in preserving resources.

**How would you characterize our current relationship with the states and the state historic preservation officers?**

It's been very good for a number of years. During the 1980s under the Reagan Administration, there was an effort to wipe out the Historic Preservation Fund, so certainly those were not years of a happy relationship between the NPS and the states. Beginning with the Bush Administration, the administrations became more supportive of historic preservation funding. So that began to stabilize our relationship. We were able to enter into a programmatic agreement with the states that has had its problems but has been successful in terms of managing park resources.

The states have been unhappy about not having increases in HPF funding, because they are the deliverers of services for our national programs. It's a partnership system that requires adequate funding for the states as well as a reasonably staffed program in the NPS, and the states have been frustrated by the lack of resources at both levels. But generally I think the relationship has improved and stabilized.

**What have been the principal problems in our relationships with partners? Is it primarily a matter of inadequate federal funding, or have there been differences in priority or policy?**

I think the frustrations probably have more to do with the role the states can play in managing programs. For example, there probably is some desire for greater responsibility for administrative decisions in the tax act program. There are certain legal impediments to that, but giving the states more credit and relying more on the decisions they make is something we're going to have to do more in the future because we're not going to have the resources. Same way with the Historic Preservation Fund: we're going to have to rely more on their ability to manage the program with less oversight on our part.

Certainly state program review was never a popular activity with the states. There's always a fiduciary relationship we have with the states that has to be maintained, because we give grants and make decisions about certification that affect tax incentives, but I think we have to move away from the idea that there has to be a heavy audit aspect of our programs toward the idea of program-building.

**Are there untapped partnership opportunities that program managers should be pursuing?**

I think we've just begun to scratch the surface in how we use partners to help us manage park cultural resources. We have a tremendous challenge with regard to the preservation and maintenance of historic structures. We're not going to do it solely with appropriated funds. If we don't find a partnership mechanism we're probably going to have to discount some of our resources.

**How have the Park Service's recent restructuring and downsizing most affected the programs you had to deal with?**

In terms of park resources stewardship responsibilities, cultural resources stewardship programs and technical support for the parks were formerly centralized in regional offices and centers, with some professional staff in the larger parks. Downsizing required a loss of central office staff of at least 40% without an increase of professional staff in the parks. So the biggest impact of restructuring and downsizing has been the loss of professional expertise.

Another effect has been on the relationship between the cultural resource professionals and the parks as we try to implement this new idea of managed competition, where professionals in our Support Offices and centers provide services to the parks but the parks don't necessarily have to turn to those professionals for those services. I think in most cases our professionals have handled it well and are beginning to deal with it in an entrepreneurial way. Some centers have created brochures that explain very clearly what their services are and what parks can expect to be provided. Former regional office programs that are now Support Office programs with strong professionals who were always dealing with the parks continue that relationship.

**You spoke of the loss of professional expertise with the 40% reduction in central office staff. Supposedly we weren't going to be losing staff so much as transferring them to parks. Have we in fact lost professional expertise?**

In some cases professional staff have moved to parks, but not all who have done so continue to have cultural resource management responsibilities. Right now we're trying to get a better handle on the numbers so we can take mid-course corrective action. But my overall feeling, just from talking to managers and staff in the field, is that while we've downsized central offices, we have not had a like number of professionals show up in the parks. One of the reasons for restructuring was to give us a better ability to focus on resources management, and I think we've lost some ability to effectively manage our cultural and natural resources. But I'm also optimistic that in the long run we'll recognize these problems and correct them.

On the national partnership program side, we should not have downsized the programs to the extent we did. There should have been a recognition that these programs, like parks, were primary deliverers of public services and therefore not subject to extreme downsizing. Also, cultural programs have had static operating budgets, and when combined with loss of staff this means that some program activities and functions will cease.

**Do you feel that dissemination of information is one of the most important things we should be concentrating on?**

Yes. I feel very strongly that we need to maintain a strong cultural resources training initiative for our national partnership programs. We always need to have money to do that, to at least prime the pump in providing training for others, not just NPS employees. Making information available about resources, whether we use technology such as the World Wide Web or traditional publications, I think will become more and more important.

**Undoubtedly there were some things you tried but failed to accomplish. What were your greatest frustrations in this regard?**

Clearly, obtaining adequate staffing and funding for our partnership and park cultural resource programs. Another was downsizing the organization in a way that made sense in terms of the things we do. We downsized rather arbitrarily across the board. We didn't look at the functions that needed to be downsized and shift our resources to the highest priority activities. Now we have to go back and figure out what are the most important things we do and shift our resources to those activities. Downsizing also hurt our professionalization initiative, in which we were identifying particular positions that had to be filled and funded.

**What do you think about cultural resources management and historic preservation as a career choice? Where do you see the opportunities now, with downsizing in the programs, for people who might want to get into these programs either inside or outside the government?**

Actually, when you look at historic preservation on a national level, considering that there are well over 800 certified local governments as an example of the communities out there interested in historic preservation, the number of consulting firms dealing with planning and historic preservation, and the careers that will inevitably become available in the NPS and other federal agencies, I think it's a good career choice. There's an obvious frustration for the graduate with an advanced degree coming out and not being able to immediately move into a career area. But all you have to do is look at the number of people we hire every year, either on a contract or cooperative agreement basis, and at the number of people involved in providing services at the local level either as employees of local government or in contract work. You have to believe that the opportunities will continue to be there. I don't think historic preservation and cultural resource management is at any greater disadvantage right now than other careers, except for maybe high technology. People will find a niche in historic preservation if that's what they want.

**What do you feel best about having accomplished?**

There isn't any one single thing I can point to that stands out as the primary accomplishment of the past 15 years. There's a whole range of activities that I've been fortunate to be involved with, with other program managers, as well as having some direct impact on. Starting back in my early years with the program, being able to stabilize the National Register programs at that time, both in terms of funding and acceptance, I think was a major accomplishment. Being able to see those programs grow over the years, being involved in such things as the battlefield program and improving our National Register—those activities have been important.

When I came on board in the early 1980s there was a practical budget problem of not recognizing needed funds for the Park Cultural Resources Preservation Program. Often that program would be cut back to resolve other budget needs. I've seen that program grow from one of \$5 million to one of over \$11 million. That's been a major accomplishment.

We went from a time when archeological survey was not recognized as being important to now when it is recognized as needed and when we've established a program and funding for it. We went from a time when we didn't have money to do inventory work for historic structures and cultural landscapes to a time when we've almost completed the List of Classified Structures and begun a park cultural landscape inventory. We went from a time when there was no funding for the inventory and cataloging of museum objects to a time, under the leadership of Ann Hitchcock, when that has become a very successful and aggressive program in overcoming that material weakness. We've gone from a time when there was not adequate funding to do historical research to one when we're at least putting more money into that area through the Cultural Resources Preservation Program. We've improved the resource management planning process and the process of identifying professional staffing needs at the park level.

I should also mention that having had tremendous reservations about our ability to meet the requirements of the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act, I think that's one area where all programs pulled together. We had some difficult times, but we were able to meet our statutory responsibilities for completing inventories and taking a leadership role.

My best memories of the organization are of the people I worked with and the unique opportunity of being associated with those professionals over the years in our resources stewardship programs and our national partnership programs. And also the unique opportunity of having been associated with the resources we have stewardship responsibility for. Very few people have that opportunity, and they should not look at it lightly.